

REPORTS

Isidor Levin and Tajik Folklore Studies: A Brief Biographical Sketch of a Forgotten Folklorist

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Isidor Haimovich Levin (1919-2018) was an important scholar of structuralist methods in folklore studies, who guided the classification and systematization of folklore texts in the former Soviet Union. Regrettably, his work is unknown to many folklorists in the present. This research note considers his biography and contributions to Soviet folklore studies.

Levin was born into a Jewish family on 20 September 1919 in the city of Daugavpils (Dvinsk), Latvia and died on 24 July 2018 in Hamburg, Germany. At the age of six, his parents sent him to Hebrew school. He later entered a four-year Jewish gymnasium, receiving his diploma in 1937. His teachers were graduates of the University of Jerusalem. In the same year, Levin entered the University of Tartu in Estonia to study Judaism. The Department of Jewish Studies in Tartu had been organized at the suggestion of the world-famous physicist Albert Einstein to save Jewish science in Europe, which had been destroyed by the Nazi party in Germany. Levin ended up studying in two departments: the Department of Jewish Studies in the Faculty of Philosophy and the Department of Comparative Anthropology in the Faculty of Religion. In Tartu, classes were held in German, which Levin spoke well. At the university, he wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to study biblical and oriental studies with the well-known scholar Uku Masing (1909-1985)—orientalist, folklorist, philosopher, philologist, poet, and translator—but Levin first had to learn Estonian. Levin mastered the language during his first two semesters in Tartu. In those years, Levin was also able to study with the famous Semitic studies scholar, Lazer Gulkovich, who had come to Tartu from the University of Leipzig after the Nazi rise to power.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in Tartu Levin was a student of comparative world and Estonian folklore with Walter Andersen (1855-1962). Anderson at the time was perhaps the leading global researcher of folktales and knew over forty languages. He was also the foremost scholarly representative of the Finnish Estonian historical-geographical school; he had distinctive views about folktales and their transmission and repetition. Anderson importantly even conducted experiments to examine the texts of spoken prose, especially of folktales [1951; 1956; Venediktova 2019].

In total, Levin's education in Tartu came from the most prominent and prolific scholars of his time, many of them steeped in philological methods. Levin not only spoke multiple languages, but he also became familiar as a philologist with a range of language families: Baltic, Germanic, Romance, Slavic, Finno-

Ugric, and ancient and modern Sami languages. He graduated from the University of Tartu in 1941 and continued his life there after Estonia was occupied and annexed by the USSR.

When World War II began in 1939, Jews, of course, were severely under threat from the Nazis. In Estonia, Levin at the time was a tenant in the house of his teacher and tutor, Masing. In 1942, at the Wannsee Conference in which the Nazis planned their “final solution” to deport and eventually murder the Jewish populations of Europe, they noted that few Jews remained in Estonia. However, at that time Levin was at least one of them. Masing, along with his wife and a few friends, risked their lives to hide Levin from the Nazis. Later, Levin recalled in his memoirs, entitled “From the Treasures of My Life and Thoughts,” that whenever there was news of Nazis coming, Masing would hide Levin. Once, he was taken to a sheepfold and remained there until the police left. He wrote that at that time “every day, every hour, every moment could have been the last for me” [2009]. However, in 1942 Levin was taken prisoner by the Estonian government. He spent three years living under assumed names and enduring terrible suffering in various prison camps: Pechora Prison, Tartu Camp, Tallinn Prison, and eventually Stutthof Concentration Camp near Gdansk. In each case, his knowledge of Baltic languages saved him; he always claimed to be from Estonia. On many occasions, he didn’t even provide his real name. When the police asked him during his arrest which state he was fighting against, Levin shrewdly replied, “I am not against any state. I consider myself a subject of the God of the gospel” [2009].

The ethnographic lessons that he had learned at the University of Tartu were useful in prison as he met people from different nationalities. He was both internally and externally cautious; several fellow prisoners recognized him, but Levin was always vigilant and quickly found ways to tell them in private that they did not know each other. Levin’s knowledge of German helped him to survive because he was able to fill out prisoners’ paperwork as an interpreter. After much suffering, on 8 March 1945 approaching Soviet troops compelled Levin’s Nazi jailers to flee, stranding Stutthof’s prisoners. Levin recounts in his memoirs that he could have stayed in Poland, but that the city of Tartu called to him.

He spent some time in Poland, sick, hungry, and wounded, among prisoners and other refugees. Soviet occupying forces did not know Polish, and thus in 1945 Levin began working as an interpreter for Soviet soldiers and only with great difficulty eventually returned to Tartu. In Estonia, he learned that his parents and all his other relatives had been murdered by the Nazis in Latvia in 1941. In 1945 in Tartu, Levin had a pleasant reunion with Masing, but Levin was again arrested, this time by Soviet authorities for being an alleged Nazi collaborator. He spent another year in prison until he was eventually proven innocent and released [Levin 2009]. From 1946-1947, Levin studied law at the University of Tartu and then devoted himself entirely to folklore research. Levin went to Leningrad in hopes of matriculating into the Institute of Folklore at the USSR Academy of Sciences for postgraduate studies. Folklorists Vladimir Propp and Mark Azadovsky administered his comparative folklore exam in 1947 and were amazed by his

knowledge of folklore scholarship [Kostjuchin 2016: 997]. However, Soviet authorities were unable to accept his diploma from Tartu, so Levin instead studied Russian language and literature at the Leningrad Pedagogical Institute named after Herzen from 1952 to 1955. From 1956, Levin worked as a researcher at the Leningrad Institute of Germanic Studies.

Levin already entered Soviet folklore studies in Leningrad with his own unique theories and comparative and structuralist methods regarding the stratification of texts, text variants, and the identification of tale types. He had cultivated this approach during his time studying in Tartu from 1937 to 1941. It was only during the late 1940s and 1950s that he began to put these ideas into practice. Although Soviet folklorists and literary critics highly appreciated his theoretical knowledge, Levin could not work as a folklorist in the Soviet Union until he earned a postgraduate degree. Turning to ancient sources, Levin spent years writing his dissertation. After significant work on the history of one ancient Babylonian tale type (AaTh 537 or AaTh 222+B+313 B), he wrote a thesis entitled “Etana. Sumerian-Akkadian legend. Source research,” a summary of which appeared in *Fabula* in 1966 [Levin 1966]. He eventually defended his thesis in 1967 [Levin 1967].

Levin’s student, Vera Venediktova [2019], argues that AaTh 537 is among the oldest folktales in the world. The Etana legend concerns the folkloric Sumerian king Etana, who flew into the sky on the wings of an eagle. Etana’s life and bravery attracted the attention of ancient poets and singers. Levin found traces of written works and oral tales about Etana in the historical plots of various ancient Jewish, Persian, and European medieval literatures. To analyze the legend, he engaged in deep source study, examining 400 variants of folkloric texts from around the world. Levin’s thesis was an important contribution to folkloristics. At his defense, he was awarded the title, Candidate of Philological Sciences. Moreover, a few months later members of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences unanimously accepted his thesis as a doctoral dissertation, and Levin was recognized as a Doctor of Philological Sciences. His extensive knowledge and deep and accurate research were highly praised by important Soviet folklorists such as Azadovsky, Propp, and Viktor Zhirmunsky, orientalists like Igor Dyakonov and Iosif Amusin, literary critic and translator Efim Etkind, and others [Levin 1967; Venediktova 2019].

From 1966 to 1984, Levin headed the Гурӯҳи табақабандӣ ва пажӯҳиши сохторшиносии матнҳои [Group for the classification and structural research of texts] in the Folklore Fund at the Institute of Language and Literature named after Rudaki of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan. Under Levin’s supervision, folklore texts that were collected during fieldwork expeditions from across the Tajik SSR and contiguous Persian-speaking areas were organized according to international standards and Levin’s own specific methods. Each folklore text in the collection, both small and large along with their variants, was individually identified. After this process was complete, under the leadership of Rajab Amonov and using Levin’s methods, the Folklore Fund began work on a multi-volume publication that catalogued all of the texts in the collection:

Куллии́ти фольклори тоҷик [Compendium of Tajik Folklore]. Levin compiled several volumes of the compendium, including the first volume, published in 1981 in Moscow: *Куллии́ти фольклори тоҷик. Масалҳо ва афсонаҳо дар бораи ҳайвонот* [Compendium of Tajik Folklore. Proverbs and Fables about Animals]. Levin authored a detailed Russian-language introduction to the work along with tale texts both in Tajik and Russian. The compendium contains several items particularly useful for researchers working on the spread of Tajik folklore, including lists of tale types, performers, and textual forms; maps that included the geographic distribution of texts; and related indexes [Levin, Rabiev, and Iavich 1981].

Levin's approach attracted the attention of folklorists from other Soviet republics and, as a result, Levin ultimately guided the classification of archival holdings of Armenian and other Caucasian folklore materials using the same approach. At a conference in Chisinau, Moldova put on by the USSR Academy of Sciences, Amonov and Levin gave a well received presentation entitled, "Таҷрибаи таҳияи куллии́ти фольклори тоҷик" [Experience with the compilation of the compendium of Tajik folklore] which was later published as a book chapter [Amonov and Levin 1984].

Another of Levin's key contributions is on the classification, quantitative analysis, and structure of the anecdote, which he completed in the 1980s but was only published years later in 2007 as a continuation of the compendium: *Куллии́ти фольклори тоҷик ҷилди II (Латифаҳо)* [Compendium of Tajik Folklore Volume II (Anecdotes)]. The book offers a detailed introduction to the collection of Tajik anecdotes and makes important contributions to folklorists' understanding of genre theory and classification. Although additional volumes of the compendium appeared in 1981, 1986, 1992, and 2007, all using Levin's innovative methods, unfortunately their publication was uneven and scattered. In total, these works offer the clearest portrait of Levin's structuralist theories about the organization and stratification of folklore texts. This work was perhaps even more influential in shaping the scholarship of many other prominent folklorists in Tajikistan [Iavich 1986; Rabiev 1986; Ulugzade 1986; Shermuhammedov 1987; Tilavov 1989; Isroilova 1999].

Levin published over 150 individual pieces of scholarship. He especially engaged in the study of folktales globally, paying particular attention to their interpretation and typological analysis. He considered Armenian, Dagestani, Turkish, Avar, Ossetian, Abkhazian, and principally Tajik folktales, as well as ancient Aramaic narrative repertoires. He translated collections of Caucasian, Armenian, Abkhazian, Russian, and Tajik folklore [Levin 1978; 1982; 1984; 1986], and additionally he wrote articles on the history of science and scholars such as Annist, Afanasev, Azadovsky, Masing, and Propp. He published articles in the popular press on the German language, Hebrew, the history of religion, philosophy, and historical events of which he was a part. Levin was a founding member of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) and was awarded the Order of the White Star, fourth degree, by the President of

Estonia in 2001. He additionally was a recipient of the Peter Italia Prize (1987) and the Friedrich Gundolf Preis (2004).

From 2006 until the end of his life in 2018, Levin lived with his wife Gisele Schenkowitz in Hamburg, Germany. Regrettably there has been little English-language scholarship on Levin's contributions to folklore studies, though portions of his memoirs have been published in Estonian, Yiddish, and Russian in internet publications.

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